Exhibition and Labor: A Study of Douban Platform Users' Self-Representation from the Perspective of Digital Labor

Binghao Xin[1] , Shuyi Li[2], Junkun Yang[3*]
[1,3] Communication University of China,Beijing 100024,China
[2]Nantong University,Nantong 226019,China
[*]Corresponding author E-mail:neal__yang@163.com

Abstract: Users in Douban groups are keen on sharing their lives and personal feelings and self-presentation on the platform. Taking the self-presentation phenomenon of Douban platform users as an entry point, this study initially explored the question of the causes and mechanisms of self-presentation and involvement in repetitive digital labor of Douban users through a questionnaire survey method and in-depth interview method. It was found that social support, social relationship maintenance, entertainment and recreation, value reinforcement and self-reflection needs positively influence users' willingness to self-present; social identity and social capital obtained from self-presentation become the causes and mechanisms of repetitive digital labor.

Keywords: self-presentation, digital labor, user research

1 Introduction

Entering the 2020s, under the new round of information technology revolution and the national epidemic showing multi-point distribution and frequent occurrence in many places, new technologies such as big data, the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence are constantly embedded in the real economy and people's daily lives. In this context, the mediated process of human society has accelerated, the alienation of people has deepened, and more and more people are included in the category of "Digital Labor". Groups such as the "985 Waste Introduction Group" once attracted attention, with users sharing their lives and personal insights in the group. We have observed that more and more users are disclosing details of their lives in posts, even updating them like diaries, engaging in meticulous self-presentation, and voluntarily becoming digital laborers on the Douban platform.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature review on Self-Presentation

The concept of "Self-Presentation" was first introduced by Goffman, who, in his early research, argued that people met each other in real-life situations with the help of verbal or non-verbal symbols, and that interpersonal interaction was more of a performance process. The Internet era has further extended the space for users to survive, and the self-presentation of users on the Internet has also drawn the attention of many scholars. Hogan, an Oxford University scholar, believes that "Self-Presentation" has developed into a kind of "Self-Presentation" in the Internet environment, where users can construct their self-image in various ways, such as by taking selfies, and "exhibit" it through the selective display. Kim et al. argue that there are two strategies of positive self-presentation and real self-presentation in online interactions, and the former chooses to present more positive self-information than the latter. Bouvier finds that Facebook users' self-presentation includes four types of identity presentation, relationship presentation, appearance presentation, and thought and behavior presentation.

Domestic scholar Ma Zhongjun believes that the presentation and construction of the self in virtual communities are based on a "community consensus", which aims to form a role that includes the "collective self". Dong Chenyu and Ding still summarize the challenges of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory in the Internet era, and summarize four Keywords: self-presentation, hidden flow, audience isolation, and tasteful performance. Li Cenggong and Zhu Huanya conduct a more detailed study on college students' WeChat self-presentation from a social psychology perspective, and their study shows that loneliness, social support and intimacy have significant effects on college students' self-presentation strategies in their circle of friends.

Most of the above studies focused on the motivation, strategy and influence of Self-Presentation, but few articles have interpreted from the perspective of Digital Labor, lacking the essential analysis of the phenomenon that users unconsciously become digital laborers in Self-Presentation.

2.2 Literature review on Digital Labor

Along with the development of the Internet and information technology, communication scholars have paid attention to the immaterial labor and production of users in the Internet medium. The Italian scholar Tiziana Terranova first proposed "Digital Labor", arguing that digital technology enables users to provide unpaid labor on the Internet, which can be regarded as a theoretical extension of the "Audience Commodity Thesis" proposed by Dallas.W.Smythe in 1951. In 2014, the British scholar Fox formally defined the concept of "Digital Labor" in his article " Digital Labor and Karl Marx", pointing out that "Digital Labor" is defined by the electronic industry it serves, producing digital information in online platforms and being

exploited by capital.

After the concept of "Digital Labor" was introduced, it also aroused the attention of many domestic scholars. Domestic scholar Wu Dingming analyzed the mechanism of transformation from "audience goods" to "digital labor" on the Internet from the perspective of the interaction between communication and labor, and explored the mechanism of labor exploitation and users' cultural production and struggle practices from the muidem and micro perspectives, respectively. In his study on Internet sports communication, Yu Pengfei pointed out that Internet sports media appropriated the digital production labor products of sports users without compensation, forcing these users to become Internet commodities and laborers. Weng Xudong and Qiang Yu explored the labor process of self-representation of users in the music streaming platform represented by NetEase CloudMusic from the perspective of the political economy of communication, and investigated the labor and production relations in users' self-representation-based media participation.

Most of these studies focused on the role transformation of users under the oppression of capital in the Internet era, and analyzed the formation and impact of their labor and exploitation mechanisms in a more macroscopic manner. In the interaction between communication and labor, the subjective initiative of users as "laborers" has been neglected to varying degrees, i.e., users' self-represented behavioral mechanism and the cycle of repeated labor, and the scope of the focused domestic social platforms is limited.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Asking the questions

From the perspective of digital labor, this paper takes Douban, a representative UGC (User-generated content) type social platform of Web 2.0, as an example and tries to answer the following questions:

Why do audiences tend to disclose details of their lives in Douban groups? From the perspective of media political economy, how do audiences become digital laborers on the Douban platform? What is the mechanism by which Douban incorporates users into repetitive digital labor?

3.2 Questionnaire method

Based on the above questions, the following assumptions are made here:

H1: Social support needs positively influence users' willingness to self-present in Douban groups

H2: The need for social relationship maintenance positively influences users' willingness to self-present in Douban groups

H3: The demand for entertainment and recreation positively influences users' willingness to self-present in Douban groups

H4: Value reinforcement and the need for self-reflection positively influence users' willingness to self-present in Douban groups

Based on the above questions, this study used a questionnaire method to sample and create a questionnaire for the overall population.

This study took the group of users who post in the Douban group as the research object.

The survey completed the process of data collection, organization, and analysis on October 19, 2022.

The survey was mainly based on open-ended and closed-ended questions with the following main content.

(1) Demographic section: including gender, age group, and education.

(2) The descending statement part of the independent variable self-presentation influence factor.

(3) The dependent variable is the descending statement component of the degree of self-presentation.

This questionnaire contains 26 questions, including 6 single-choice questions and 20 matrix questions. The questionnaire was distributed online through Douban, WeChat friends circle, Weibo, Questionnaire Star sample database and other online channels.

3.3 In-depth interview method

The interview questions are divided into three main sections.

The first part mainly deals with the basic information of the interviewees, including their age, education, and the length of time they have joined the Douban group.

In the second part, the research questions are downscaled to interview questions. They include their views on sharing their lives on Douban, whether they are willing to share their lives on Douban often and the way they share their lives.

In the third part, the preparation mainly deals with possible deeper digging.

During the interviews and the conduct of the study, the researcher tried to avoid the fourfold ethical issues and transgressions highlighted by scholar Al-an Bryman: (1) causing harm to research participants; (2) not using informed consent documents or materials; (3) violating the privacy of research participants; and (4) deceiving research participants. The interviewees were also allowed to remain silent or withdraw from the interview if they had any questions they did not want to answer or if they were dissatisfied with the interview process. Interview materials that the interviewees declared that they did not want to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

This study conducted 30-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the 38 interviewers who ranked high in Douban group activity (as shown in Table 1). The interviews began in May 2022 and ended in October 2022. The interviewees firstly included members of

the Douban "985 Waste Introduction Program" group, and secondly, additional research samples were collected through the interviewees' recommendations.

According to the maximum sampling principle of the qualitative research method, when the 38th interviewee was recruited, all the interviews were sufficient to answer the research questions and the sample collection was closed. The interviewees differed in age, gender, education level, the region they lived in, and interests, and the degree of homogeneity was low. Interviews were conducted as telephone interviews/WeChat text interviews. The interview results were compiled into a verbatim transcript, and the total number of words in the interview transcript was 18,432. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in table 1.

Table 1 Basic information of the interviewees

Interviewees	Age	Gender	Highest degree (including enrollment)	Location	Length of time using Douban
1	18	Female	Undergraduate	Jiangsu	January to March
2	19	Female	Undergraduate	Shandong	March to June
3	19	Male	Undergraduate	Shaanxi	January to March
4	18	Female	Undergraduate	Shaanxi	June to December
5	19	Male	Undergraduate	Shanxi	March to June
6	20	Female	Undergraduate	Shanghai	January to March
7	21	Female	Undergraduate	Beijing	1 year and above
8	20	Male	Undergraduate	Shanghai	June to December
9	22	Male	Undergraduate	Guangdong	January to March
10	21	Male	Undergraduate	Guizhou	1 year and above
11	20	Female	Undergraduate	Jiangsu	January to March
12	18	Male	Undergraduate	Anhui	March to June
13	19	Female	Undergraduate	Sichuan	1 year and above
14	20	Female	Undergraduate	Xinjiang	March to June
15	22	Male	Undergraduate	Gansu	January to March
16	24	Male	Master	Anhui	1 year and above
17	23	Female	Master	Beijing	March to June
18	28	Female	Master	Beijing	January to March
19	26	Male	Master	Shanghai	1 year and above
20	23	Male	Master	Jiangxi	March to June
21	24	Female	Master	Henan	June to December
22	26	Male	Master	Hubei	June to December
23	25	Female	Master	Fujian	March to June
24	25	Male	Master	Jiangsu	January to March
25	24	Male	Master	Sichuan	March to June
26	30	Male	Master	Chongqing	June to December
27	31	Female	Master	Liaoning	1 year and above
28	23	Female	Master	Zhejiang	June to December
29	28	Female	PhD	Hebei	March to June

30	27	Female	PhD	Zhejiang	1 year and above
31	29	Male	PhD	Guangdong	January to March
32	27	Male	PhD	Shanghai	March to June
33	28	Female	PhD	Jiangsu	January to March
34	35	Male	PhD	Hunan	1 year and above
35	37	Male	PhD	Hubei	June to December
36	35	Male	PhD	Yunnan	January to March
37	29	Male	PhD	Heilongjiang	1 year and above
38	37	Male	PhD	Hebei	1 year and above

4 Research results and analysis

4.1 Sample characteristics description

A total of 257 samples were collected in this questionnaire survey, among which 212 samples used the Douban platform. Among the interviewed Douban users, 69% of them said they had posted on the Douban platform, and most of the posts published by this group of users in the past six months were "less than 5", which shows that Douban users' usage characteristics are mainly browsing and less frequent self-presentation.

4.2 Description of structural analysis results

4.2.1 Social support needs positively influence self-presentation intention

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that social support needs positively influenced users' willingness to self-present ($r=0.251$, $p=0.000$), indicating that the higher the degree to which the Douban platform meets users' social support needs, the stronger users' willingness to self-present in Douban, and research hypothesis H1 was supported. Douban as a social networking site makes the boundary between virtual and reality increasingly blurred, and becomes an effective supplement to real social relationships. Douban users with stronger social support needs tend to build their self-image in Douban groups, thus further optimizing real social relationships.

4.2.2 The need for social relationship maintenance positively influences the willingness to present oneself

Social relationship maintenance needs positively influenced users' willingness to self-present ($r=0.293$, $p=0.000$), indicating that the more the Douban platform satisfies users' social relationship maintenance needs, the stronger users' willingness to self-present in Douban, and research hypothesis H2 was supported. Douban users' social relationships in Douban groups are a further extension of real social relationships, which implies that Douban users' behavior

is still influenced by social pressure to maintain good interpersonal relationships in the groups. This also motivates users to maintain social relationships by liking others and other behaviors to present a friendly self-image and thus gain social capital.

4.2.3 The need for entertainment positively influences the willingness to present oneself

Entertainment needs positively affect users' willingness to present themselves (r=0.587, p=0.000), indicating that the more the Douban platform satisfies users' entertainment needs, the stronger users' willingness to present themselves on Douban, and research hypothesis H3 is supported. With the advent of the network society as suggested by Kast, social platforms have become an important form of entertainment for network users. Self-presentation in Douban users' groups can effectively satisfy their desire for expression on the one hand, and poach their texts in interaction with others on the other, forming an orgy that effectively meets users' needs for entertainment and recreation.

4.2.4 Value Reinforcement and Reflection Needs Positively Influence Self-Presentation Willingness

The value reinforcement and introspection needs positively influenced users' willingness to self-present (r=0.531, p=0.000), which indicates that the more the Douban platform satisfies users' value reinforcement and introspection needs, the stronger users' willingness to self-present in Douban, and research hypothesis H4 is supported. Brummer's self-interaction theory states that self-interaction is essentially the internalization of social interaction with others. Douban users' value reinforcement and introspection are essentially the need to present their ideal self, and this ideal self needs to be realized through self-presentation and interactions with others. In the process of self-presentation, Douban users engage in self-value reinforcement and introspection, and modify their expectations based on the evaluations of others, reaching a virtuous cycle.

5 Discussion

5.1 The dual orientation of subject and client needs is the intrinsic motivation of user self-presentation

Unlike the WeChat moment, which is dominated by strong relationships, the Douban group is a more open and weakly relationship-driven public arena. Based on the results of the questionnaire study, it can be seen that the two demands interact to motivate users to actively present themselves in Douban groups: the egocentric subject demand for entertainment and self-worth reinforcement, and the other-centric object demand for maintaining social relationships

and gaining social support.

This intrinsic drive was also reflected in the interview results, e.g. S1: "I feel happy that my own ideas are heard and recognized by others when I discuss them in the group." By actively participating in discussions in personalized Douban groups for self-presentation, users unconsciously include themselves in the positive cycle of "self-presentation - positive feedback (social support) - self-satisfaction (self-worth reinforcement) - further self-presentation "This is the inner motivation for users to perform themselves repeatedly.

5.2 The platform enlists users' "exhibition labor" for free

The commodification of data is the beginning of digital labor, and in contrast to traditional commodities, the establishment of digital labor begins with the transformation of commodities into data. Douban is a combination of a tasting system, an expression system, and a communication system, which gives users a public domain for self-representation, and their right to freely perform is also a "work permit" for their role transformation. From the perspective of content production, users who post in Douban groups assume the role of "laborers" in the process of self-presentation. With the UGC (User Generated Content) model at its core, the "performance labor" performed by users is an important value source for the Douban platform.

These labor products are generated from users' daily unconscious digital labor, and this labor process only remains at the general level of unpaid labor, and the digital goods produced are naturally requisitioned by the platform free of charge. The labor data left behind can be used by the platform to improve the algorithm and enhance the experience, and at the same time attract more users to participate in the "exhibition labor". Users have been involved in the production and marketing process, and the platform possesses users' activity trajectories and labor results at almost no cost, and uses them to attract another group of new users continuously.

5.3 Technological availability and ideological constructs conceal a labor relationship with clear power asymmetry

The appropriation of users' digital labor goods at low or even zero cost is enough to highlight the absolute hegemonic position of the platform in this pair of labor relations, yet the unequal power relations go far beyond that.

In terms of labor willingness, the platform glorifies labor, making users unconsciously put into digital production and willingly become laborers; in terms of production materials, the platform owns all behavioral data of all users and the right to use most of the data, while users do not have the right to use all technical functions and obtain all information due to the restrictions of rank or membership system, and cannot even independently decide the use of their behavioral data; in terms of labor time, the platform owns all behavioral data of all users and the right to use them. In terms of labor time, the platform not only occupies the user's

specific labor time, but also occupies the user's lifetime, and compulsorily and costlessly extends the labor time of digital production; in terms of responsibility attribution, due to the existence of user terms and punishment mechanism, although the user undertakes all the labor and creates continuous value for the platform, he also has to bear all the responsibilities and risks of labor results by himself. The platform does not protect their rights and interests and provide them with reasonable compensation. This shows the highly skewed power relations in every aspect of the digital labor process.

Users do not care about this skewed labor relationship. Interview result S3, "I don't feel that I am working for Douban, my work is unhappy, but I feel relaxed and happy when I use Douban," largely represents the common psychology of most users, that is, they are unconsciously working and happy. However, the fact that users are unaware of the exploitation mechanism of unpaid labor is not entirely attributable to individual reasons.

From the technical attributes, Douban has four available qualities: persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability, and the various subdivision functions under Douban provide users with unlimited possibilities. This technology attracts users to invest in digital labor. By expressing positive social support through likes, comments, retweets, and follows, it connects bonds between users, binds weakly connected users, and enables specific groups of users to generate common group values and ideologies. For example, interview result S2 "I met a group of good friends, although we have never met, Douban is our 'home', so we have to go back to 'home' often". Clearly, in users' consciousness, the platform is not the exploiter of labor, but rather the creator of technology and the sustainer of relationships - and it is through this technological availability that the platform conceals the essential labor relationship.

6 Conclusion

This study theorized the phenomenon of self-representation on the Douban platform through interviews and questionnaires, and found that the four needs of seeking social support, maintaining social relationships, entertainment and recreation, and value reinforcement and introspection all positively influence users' willingness to self-represent in Douban groups. This study also analyzes the role transformation and repetitive labor mechanism of users in the self-representation process from the perspective of the political economy of communication.

With the further penetration of capitalism into people's lives, the boundary between the use of new media and digital labor has been further blurred, and the self-presentation of social media has become the norm in digital labor. As the proportion of the "politics of life" in digital labor studies increases further, related studies should also continue to deepen in the direction of how digital labor reshapes our lives.

References

[1]. Dong Chenyu & Ding Still. (2018). When Goffman meets the Internet - Self-presentation and performance in social media. Journalism and Writing (01), 56-62.(in Chinese)

[2]. Kim, J., & Lee, J. E. (2011). The Facebook paths to happiness: Effects of the number of Facebook friends and self-presentation on subjective well-being. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 14(6) , 359 - 364. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 14(6), 359 - 364.

[3]. Bouvier. (2012). How Facebook users select identity categories for self-presentation. Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 7(1):37-57.

[4]. Hogan, B. (2010) , The presentation of self in the age of social media:Distinguishing performances and exhibition lletin of Science, Technology&Society, 30 (6) , 377-386.

[5]. Ma Zhongjun. (2011). The construction and presentation of virtual self in virtual communities. Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China) (06), 139-141.(in Chinese)

[6]. Li Weigeng & Zhu Huanya. (2019). Why the circle of friends is sent: A study of college students' self-presentation strategies and influencing factors of WeChat under the social-psychological perspective. News Reporter (05), 25-35.

[7]. Wu, D. M. (2017). The laborization of online "audience": a study of the industrial status of online "audience" in the perspective of communication political economy. International Journalism (06), 124-137. (in Chinese)

[8]. Yu, Pengfei. (2020). Digital labor:A study of Internet sports communication in the perspective of communication political economy. Journal of Chengdu Sports Institute (01), 53-59. (in Chinese)

[9]. Weng, X.D. & Jiang, Mata. (2021). A kind of hidden exhibitionist labor - Self-exhibition and digital labor in music streaming platforms. Journalism (12), 68-80.(in Chinese)

[10]. Wang, Weiping & Chen, Ya. (2022). A political economy analysis of the essential mechanism of capitalist digital labor. Theory of Thought Education (05), 19-25. (in Chinese)

[11]. Christian Fuchs. (2010). Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet. The Information Society, 26(3), 179-196.

[12]. Eran Fisher. (2012). How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites. tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique, 10(2), 171-183.

[13]. Italian scholar Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy" (2000)